



PROGRESSIVES FOR  
QUALITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

MICHIGAN  
**DEMOCRATS**

*for* EDUCATION REFORM

TESTIMONY OF HARRISON BLACKMOND, SENATE EDUCATION  
COMMITTEE

September 28, 2011

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for giving me this opportunity to appear before you and share with you my thoughts and concerns about the legislation under consideration, especially Senate Bills 618, 619 and 620.

My name is Harrison Blackmond. I am State Director for Michigan Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) and I also serve as President of Progressives for Quality Public Schools (Progressives).

Michigan DFER is one of 10 state branches of a national political action committee formed in 2007.

DFER believes that a first-rate system of public education is the cornerstone of a prosperous, free and just society, yet millions of American children today - particularly low-income and children of color - are trapped in persistently failing schools that are part of deeply dysfunctional school systems. These systems, once viewed romantically as avenues of opportunity for all, have become captive to powerful, entrenched interests that too often put the demands of adults before the educational needs of children. This perverse hierarchy of priorities is political, and thus requires a political response.

Both political parties have failed to address the tragic decline of our system of public education, but it is the Democratic Party - our party - which must question how we allowed ourselves to drift so far from our mission. Fighting on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable individuals is what our party is supposed to stand for.

Democrats for Education Reform aims to return the Democratic Party to its rightful place as a champion of children, first and foremost, in America's public education systems.

We support leaders in our party who have the courage to challenge a failing status quo and who believe that the severity of our nation's educational crisis demands that we tackle this problem using every possible tool at our disposal.

We believe that reforming broken public school systems cannot be accomplished by tinkering at the margins, but rather through bold and revolutionary leadership. This requires opening up the traditional top-down monopoly of most school systems and empowering all parents to access great schools for their children.

We know that decisive action today will benefit our children, our party and ultimately our nation.

Progressives is a Michigan based nonpartisan education advocacy nonprofit organization whose mission is to identify, organize and mobilize supporters of quality public schools to demand urgent and appropriate action to reform and reinvent public education. We envision a Michigan public education system where *every* Michigan child has an accessible, *quality public school* to attend, and is prepared for graduation, for higher education and a productive future. We work with organizations like StudentsFirst.org, Education Trust, Excellent Schools Detroit, Great Lakes Education Project and Michigan Association of Public School Academies to further our mission.

We support parents, policymakers, concerned citizens, organizations and educators who share our mission and vision for Michigan children.

For more than 35 years, I have dedicated my life towards helping children receive the quality education they deserve. I have served a multitude of roles with respect to Michigan's education system, including:

- Uniserv Director, Michigan Education Association
- Staff Attorney, Michigan Education Association
- Chair of the Marygrove College Board of Trustees

- President of the Business\Education Training Alliance, an affiliate of the Detroit Regional Chamber and originator of the Detroit Compact Program, a forerunner of the Kalamazoo Promise
- Vice Chairman and member of the Executive Committee of the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce and Chair of its Education Committee
- President of the Detroit Black Alliance for Education Options

I am a product of segregated schools in Alabama and the inner-city schools of Cincinnati, Ohio. I have Bachelor and Masters Degrees from the University of Cincinnati and a Law Degree from the University of Michigan Law School. I am a member of the Michigan and California Bar Associations. As you can see, education has literally changed my life.

I don't need to remind you that the bills you are considering have the potential to radically change the way we educate children in Michigan. This is not simply adding more schools to the mix; with this legislation *we are creating a new system of schools.*

In addition to removing the cap for universities, it removes the geographical boundaries for community colleges; this may turn out to be one of the biggest problems with this legislation. Community college boards may be less accountable for students whose parents do not vote for them. University boards have their school's reputation to consider and many are elected statewide.

Think about that for a moment and realize the seriousness of what we are about to do, because if we don't do it right, we will affect the lives and futures of countless Michigan citizens. We are about to put in motion something that has not been done with respect to k-12 education since the creation of the public school system in Michigan and the passage of the original charter school legislation. If this legislation passes as is, it is conceivable that one day we will have more charter schools than traditional district schools, especially in urban areas. That is not an exaggeration.

You can be sure that those who passed legislation establishing the public school system in Michigan could never imagine what has occurred over the years. Did they anticipate the role special interests would play in the operation of the schools? Did they anticipate the role the federal government would play? Did they know how critical even a high school

education would become? While we cannot anticipate every problem or consequence of what we do with this legislation, Michigan's children and families deserve careful, thoughtful and full consideration of the potential impact of these bills.

Neither I nor my organizations have anything to gain from this legislation. We are not authorizers, not charter school lobbyists, not school district lobbyists. We see ourselves as a voice for parents and children, especially those who can't afford expensive lobbyists.

I am not here to defend the status quo. I believe all types of public schools, including too many charters, are failing our children. Clearly, charter schools are not "Superman." By themselves they will not save our children, and they are not a reform in the true sense of the word. *Charter schools represent a new strategy or mechanism for providing education using a different approach that has the potential to be more effective, efficient and adaptable.* With charters we can focus on the site where education and innovation takes place: individual schools. Resources as well as accountability can be more easily directed and assigned. Staffing and program changes can be made quickly, effectively and efficiently.

Whether charter schools reach their full potential depends in large measure on the authorizers and our ability to hold them accountable for charter school performance.

Lou Glazer, President of Michigan Future and a long time supporter of charter schools and observer of school performance in southeast Michigan, just last week wrote a blog on the organization's website entitled *Unlimited charters: not smart* in which he states that his organization's long standing support for charter schools is "tempered by the reality of student performance in charter schools. It is mixed at best":

"The ideological rhetoric is that traditional public schools with elected school boards, strong unions and big centralized bureaucracies face permanent gale force winds that make it almost impossible to deliver effective teaching and learning leading to high student achievement. And that freed from all those evils plus having parents and students choose their school, charters will get far better student achievement. And that university authorizers, not having local elected schools boards, will police quality far better so only high quality charters will

be allowed to operate long term. Sounds great in theory, but the reality is much different.

Detroit is where the state's charters are most concentrated. Both in the city and in the inner ring suburbs where it is easy to attract students living in the city. Add to that, according to most pundits, policy makers and business leaders here and nationally that DPS is the worst school district in the country, you can't have an easier environment for charters to demonstrate their superiority.

But they haven't. Not even close. Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD) has developed a report card that ranks schools on student achievement. It includes schools in and out of the city ..... ESD then hosted a series of shoppers fairs to highlight high performing schools for Detroit parents. To be invited to the fair elementary and middle schools had to have at least 75% of their students rated as proficient on both the MEAP reading and math tests. For high schools it was 16.5 on the ACT. Both standards are quite low.

How did the charters do? Not great to say the least. Of 59 charter elementary schools, only 8 met the standard to be invited to the shoppers fairs. For middle schools only 5 out of 48. And for high schools only 3 out of 22. Most embarrassing for charters is that there were more DPS schools that met the standard at each level than charters: 12 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and 4 high schools.

DPS's reputation as an awful school district is well deserved. That they can operate more higher performing schools at all grade levels than the more than 100 charters with large numbers of Detroit students is not evidence that they are a better district than their reputation, but that charters by and large do not deserve their reputation as delivering high student achievement. Some do, most don't.

That experience leads one to believe that eliminating the cap on charter schools as has been proposed in Lansing will almost certainly lead to the creation of far more low performing than high performing new schools. Not a good way to raise student achievement. A better idea, that we proposed nearly a decade ago, is to give authorizers the ability to earn the right to exceed the cap based on the student

achievement of the schools they authorize. The better their students do, the more schools they can authorize.

We want innovation and new entrants so a fixed cap is not ideal. But we also want schools vetted for quality *before* (emphasis added) they are allowed to open and held accountable for student achievement once they are open so no cap is not ideal either. We need something that gives us the best chance of more good schools and fewer bad schools. Seems to us that a system that rewards authorizers for good student achievement gives us the best chance of doing that."

I had hoped that the Senate would consider legislation that would not only remove the cap on university authorized charter schools, but would put in place safeguards so that no child becomes the victim of a failed charter school experiment. I had hoped that the Senate would put in place strong accountability provisions that would require that authorizers issue charters only to those operators who have a solid track record of educating the kinds of students they will attract or those who can demonstrate that their education approach is grounded in sound research and stands a strong likelihood of successfully educating children. No child should be subjected to unsound, untried and unproven educational approaches and methods.

It is not enough that authorizers say they will close bad schools after three to five years. What happens to those children during those years and after the school is closed? What affect will those three to five years of inadequate or nonexistent education have on hundreds, if not thousands of children? Who will be held accountable for the decision to authorize a charter for such schools? What are the consequences?

In my view, authorizers are the key. They make the critical decisions. Central Michigan, Grand Valley and others have shown that they can provide oversight and will close underperforming schools. Some authorizers have never closed underperforming schools and most if not all authorizers have some schools that are way below the Michigan average, which should be the benchmark for charter school performance. But what happens when we discover that an authorizer has authorized one or more substandard schools? How are they held accountable?

Perhaps Lou Glazer's "reward and punishment" approach: reward authorizers whose schools demonstrate high student achievement or

academic growth by allowing them to open more schools; penalize those authorizers whose schools don't demonstrate such growth by not allowing them to charter as many schools. Clearly, just as we cannot leave traditional school districts to their own devices, we cannot leave authorizers to theirs.

Innocent children will suffer, perhaps for a lifetime. I don't believe any of us want that. DFER and Progressives stand ready to work with you to ensure that we accomplish what we all want: high quality schools for all Michigan children. We should use this legislation as the starting point for producing a bill that addresses both *quality and quantity*.

Thank you